
PITFALLS OF A CULTURAL PARADIGM

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The image of a minority culture

The clash of two opposing tendencies have determined the life of minorities¹ in the Hungarian society in Romania over the last decades. The everyday experience of the ever-increasing deprivation of rights² have been opposed by the inner need (the subjective demand) for survival. At the same time, this has gone hand in hand with the initiation of a changing process of life-style³ which has established the interior equilibrium of those frames of being in which the traditional factors of survival could prevail and could oppose, more or less successfully, the exterior assimilative endeavours of power. Therefore the minority has become more and more defenceless in front of the assimilation mechanisms⁴ controlled by the centre. In these circumstances cultural self - realisation appeared to be the only alternative of survival. Step by step, minority consciousness developed an image of culture that endowed culture with a life-saving, community-preserving role beyond its immanent value-creating dimension. This image was kept alive by the belief that a minority can preserve its identity with the help of culture, even if it is deprived of its rights.⁵

¹ The analysis refers to experiences of Hungarian minority existence and culture in Romania.

² The elimination of the native language from jurisdiction, economy and its limitation in education and culture; the gradual liquidation of the system of minority institutions; treating the minority individual as an inferior citizen in some cases, etc.

³ The breaking up of traditional communities as a result of industrialization and urbanization; setting up demographical equilibrium by settling.

⁴ The aggressive assimilation of minorities was one of the main object of the official party and state policy for decades.

⁵ Without questioning the identity-creating and preserving role of culture I consider it problematic that other identity-preserving factors disappeared from the forefront of public and individual endeavours and culture tried to take over their sphere of action. Thus basic existential problems were transferred to the field of culture. At the same time the system of culture was significantly reduced; it was limited to the humanities and within this to literature; it identified with literature-centrism and the sphere of humanities built around it. Culture became the disseminator of ideologic values and moral norms and some kind of pedagogical view that placed the educational role of culture above all, became authoritative in judging cultural value-creation.

This image of culture has a tradition of several decades in the Hungarian minority society in Romania, it accompanies our minority life throughout. In my opinion this image of culture is connected to a peculiar interpretation of the minority being⁶ which is based in its turn on a certain way of questioning. What is the power that can ensure our survival, the continuity of our minority being? This question arises again and again in the critical situation of our minority being. We have not been able to find a reassuring answer to this until today.

A more thorough analytic-interpretative examination would point out that there is no univocal answer to this question because it has been proven to be false for at least two reasons.

Such a question encompasses the unspoken premise that minority being is inherently incomplete; it is a moral burden for those who experience it. One must accept the lack of completeness alongside with his minority being. The feeling of moral superiority and possibility of self-realisation in culture can compensate them for their natural exclusion from other dimensions of being and for their limited possibilities of self-realisation.

On the other hand, such a question presupposes that a particular dimension of being (morality or culture for example) has a distinct role in the totality of being. But precisely the experience of critical situations proves that favouring economic, moral or cultural factors over other factors and regarding them into powers of survival leads to distortions which undermine the wholeness of being. The intellectual illusion which endows culture with minority - saving, preserving qualities and which is continuously reproduced, but fails in critical situations, has an important role in this respect.

The image of culture produced over a long period has become rooted in people's minds and has become an unreflected cultural paradigm which was supported and reproduced by its self-reproduction mechanisms. These self-reproductive mechanisms of the minority cultural paradigm worked even when the change of circumstances required a change of paradigm precisely in the minority life-interpretation. Recent experience proves that the concept of culture which legitimizes itself as a power of survival works as a restraining and subverting power in the present situation when harmonizing minority life-interpretation with the changing circumstances becomes an absolute necessity.⁷

⁶ "Minority being" is used by the author as a philosophical term. "Minority existence" is the term that corresponds to it in everyday language. (the translator)

⁷ Regarding circumstances I refer to the events in December 1989.

A more thorough analytic-interpretative examination would prove that this cultural paradigm led to the lasting distortion of minority consciousness; even culture lost its value-creating content and function in this process. This examination can only be effective if besides the cultural paradigm it is also directed at that peculiar minority life-interpretation on the spiritual background of which this cultural paradigm developed.

Minority - saving intellectuals

The image of culture centering round the idea of the cultural self-realisation of the minority became an integral part of the conscience of Hungarian intellectuals in Romania and therefore into the whole minority conscience. The mode of being which gave culture a distinct role, set intellectuals who supported and operated the system of cultural institutions a peculiar task. The intellectuals' concept of culture determined the concept of their own sphere of action and their cultural standpoint determined considerably the formation of our minority culture. Therefore the range of intellectuals' duties became identical with that of scribes who took upon themselves the moral role of minority-saving leaders are able to place cultural value-creation in the service of minority-saving.

Being an adherent of this concept, intellectuals viewed culture from the point of view of the moral demand of minority-saving and made culture the bearer of this moral demand. They endowed culture with a minority-saving role; they considered that supporting culture, developing its system of institutions was the repository of the continuity of minority being. They placed culture in the service of imaginary minority interests which they saw as real minority interests through their "intellectual spectacles".

This culture concept of the intellectuals led to a double distortion in the functioning and sphere of action of culture:

On the one hand, cultural value-creation was determined by the exterior situation instead of the interior autonomy of the system of culture. Therefore the concrete tasks and moral norms of minority-saving were not a consequence of the value-creating functions of an autonomous culture which is based on minority being and communicates with it, but vice versa: the value-creating functions of culture were the consequence of the conscience of intellectuals that transformed the demands of minority being into moral imperatives.

On the other hand, culture became the mouthpiece of the interests evolving in intellectuals' aprioristic awareness of their situation, it presented these as the real interests of the minority. However, revealing the real interests

of the minority should have been the task of a harmoniously built, active culture that embraces all the important fields of spiritual life and joins in the cycle of national and world culture.

The group of intellectuals that supported and activated minority culture defined its own intellectuality and the nature of its roles in terms of this culture. The ideology-creating mechanisms which led to the formation of intellectuals' image of themselves and of their role ousted the autonomous mechanisms of cultural value-creation from the cultural formation. In the practice of culture developed by the ideology-creating mechanisms moral criteria based on considerations outside culture became the main reference points of cultural value-creation. This frame of reference worked also as a system of selection that narrowed down the field of real cultural creation and endowed it with a value-orientation that preferred the principle of serving the people (which springs from the moral demand of minority-saving) to autonomous value-creation. This mechanism eliminated or subordinated all fields of cultural creation that did not submit themselves to this principle. The intellectual conduct that enforced this cultural paradigm produced a model of intellectual attitude that was for decades the measure of the only intellectual attitude considered to be authentic. This model replaced intellectuals' inability to act and their deprivation of real possibilities of acting with the illusion of the active intellectual. The lack of the experience of acting transformed into the imperative of "act as you can" forms on the level of culture. Thus the production of symbols of minority being replaced authentic value-creation in culture.

The double role of institutions

The institutions of minority culture acquired a distinct status in this process. Institutions became symbols of survival and their mere existence became of primary importance as compared to the value of their real activity. The more the power endangered their existence the stronger their nature of symbol became and the more intensive their symbol-creating activity grew that repressed the creation and dissemination of authentic cultural values. The intellectuals who activated the institutions were models of heroism who fought for the survival of institutions day by day and carried out the moral imperative of perseverance. However, the survival of institutions served intellectuals' own interests, ensured their survival, offered a self-justifying strategy for the continuous preservation of their cultural attitude. It endowed their illusory sphere of action with the appearance of reality.

From this perspective, institutions performed a double role. Firstly, they served as a frame for the continuous reproduction of this cultural paradigm, for the representation of symbols of minority being in always new forms and for proving intellectuals' *raison d'être*. The continuous reproduction of this cultural paradigm became the principle of cultural value-creation and of intellectuals' permanent self-justifying strategy. Otherwise the lack of cultural values that allow real self-knowledge in the minority conscience and offer real alternatives of survival were transformed by the propagandist activity of institutions into needs that could be satisfied with "consuming" the symbols of being offered by them. This mainly affected the conscience of those groups which were removed from their traditional cultural surroundings by the change of lifestyle, groups that could satisfy their need for identity with these symbols of being.

On account of their twofold nature and function the institutions of minority culture produced and promoted a false intellectual conscience that combined "knowledge in advance" with the superfluity of actual knowledge. This prevented institutions from taking possession of modern means of knowledge that could help them in developing a more precise view of reality and kept them from any critical self-reflection that could warn intellectuals of the need of demolishing from inside their system of illusions. At the same time it made them resistant to any exterior initiative that would threaten them with setting up their inner equilibrium. Therefore they could not develop effective communication with other culture-creating endeavours that tried to institutionalise authentic value-creation and urged an opening towards broader cultural connections.

All these processes gradually formed a long-lasting deficient circle which ensured the undisturbed reproduction of the above mentioned cultural paradigm⁸ and its legitimacy which was important for maintaining its inner equilibrium. The

⁸ Several fields of culture - otherwise important from the point of view of minority survival - have been driven out from this paradigm. During this period there were groups of young intellectuals, young engineers and groups of specialists interested in technical, philosophical and sociological research who could not be integrated by the system of institutions based on this cultural paradigm and whose endeavours of forming institutions were marginalized. Therefore this system of institutions indirectly contributed to their dispersal. Perhaps it is also because of this that intellectuals controlling the system of institutions belonging to this paradigm could maintain - on account of their number and position as well as of their being symbols of stability - even within the changing circumstances, their status of spokespersons and initiators and also their influence, preserving therefore a cultural attitude which ensured the reproduction of the traditional paradigm and its own reproduction as well.

intellectuals who created and activated the institutions and who were convinced of the importance of their minority-saving role could project their illusions about culture into public conscience too, precisely by these institutions. Thanks to the "need - producing" activity of institutions these illusions were accepted. The wide acceptance of culture disseminated by these institutions proved their *raison d'être*. This legitimized intellectuals' belief that their institutions satisfy real demands and that they submit their actions to an unquestionable moral order.

Two concepts of minority

How can we characterize the minority life-interpretation which is the basis of the above mentioned concept of culture? In my opinion this minority life-interpretation consists of two concepts of minority, both of them actively present in Hungarian culture in Romania, strengthening each other.

One of the concepts treats minority as a negative quantitative-statistical category, on a level which surpasses the real existential problems - not those imagined from outside or from above - of individuals living in minority. The quantitative-statistical minority refers to a multitude which is inferior to the majority in number, therefore - so it seems - it is more exposed to cessation. A lesser multitude disappears sooner than a greater one. Therefore this quantitative concept implies a continuous sense of danger, the nightmare of the minority that it ceases to exist. Its members can grow old and die, become assimilated by the majority or simply wandering away, dropping out. This awareness of danger is permanently nourished by everyday experiences which give examples of the decrease of birth-rate, the emigration of certain minority individuals or families or their assimilation.

The continuous awareness of danger that originates in the quantitative concept of minority is associated with the qualitative concept of minority. According to this, minority being embodies a special category of being that works as a source of values and gives the individuals of the minority a peculiar feeling of dignity. From this perspective minority is more than a simple multitude, a mere group of people; it is a community (of being) which gains its inner cohesion from this peculiar category of being. Therefore minorities stick to those peculiar values which define their being a community and which could be the basis of their otherness and therefore of their minority-community identity. They consider these values sources of life, the basis of their being

The coexistence of the two concepts of minority (the quantitative and qualitative one) leads to an apparently contradiction in minority conscience: the sense of danger induced by the (quantitative) minority state is compensated pre-

cisely by the maintenance and reinforcement of the minority category of being. This contradiction is sensed by every normal minority conscience that does not experience minority being as a deficiency, a negativity, a disadvantage but rather as a virtual (positive) human state of being and it does not see the surpassing of minority being a way out but considers the natural acceptance of it and the development of its inner values a solution. This contradiction proves to be soluble with such an attitude. Its surpassing depends on the ability of the minority of transforming their group into an active, self-organizing, value-creating community and their life-style into a community life-style.

The illusory community

In a historical-social situation in which there is a great danger of decrease in number and exterior (political, administrative) and interior (the lack of material and spiritual capital) prevent the natural development of minority self-organization, the above mentioned contradiction stiffens into a paradox in minority conscience and finally the distorted conscience itself becomes the main obstacle of value-creating development. This is our present case: exterior circumstances are favourable, political, juridical and administrative obstacles seem to disappear. In this conscience full of contradictions the community hindered in its real existence and functioning is replaced by an illusory community, the illusion of community. This is fed by the continuous awareness of danger that accompanies minority being; it represses the real participation in the value-creating activity that would create a real community and the undisturbed communication necessary for this.

In these circumstances unreflected and seemingly rational but pseudo-rational views entrenched themselves in minority conscience and became the leading motifs of minority culture. The often repeated assertion that the state of being deprived of rights and the awareness of deprivation stimulates solidarity is such a view. A certain amount of exterior pressure is needed to make individuals prefer the interests of the community to their personal interests and ambitions and to remain within the bounds of community. Granting the rights of minorities involves the risk of the loosening of community ties and of the increase of dropout. Such views - often supported by the misinterpreted data of sociological surveys - start from the premise that a certain amount of deprivation of rights is the very essence of minority being and that the ensuing absence and uncertainty of existence act as community-welding forces.

All this leads to an interpretation of existence according to which minority being is a "requirement-being"; taking it on means a moral demand

and duty, whereas bearing the deprivation of rights and suffering is some kind of moral achievement. In this distorted interpretation of existence the natural relation between the human state of being and its moral dimension is turned inside out. The system of moral demands does not develop on the grounds of the natural human state of being but everyday life comes under the pressure of an aprioristic and unquestionable system of moral premises, a self-inducing moral compulsion. Thus the acceptance of minority being is an existential command the violation of which brings about moral annihilation which exceeds existential annihilation; the consistent undertaking of it offers moral surrogates that counterbalance existential absences; it offers a sense of moral superiority that transforms real disadvantages into illusory advantages. Therefore minority being changes into a paradox state of being under the influence of this paradoxical conscience: instead of solving real existential problems it becomes a temple of illusion.

The individual under the constraint of choosing

The described paradox state of being and conscience results in a seemingly unsoluble and morally uncontrollable contradiction within the individual and the community also. Naturally, "being-in-this-way" and "being-here" of the minority community is not a matter of choice. It is simply a condition which cannot be the source of some moral attitude in its selfness. It is a historical condition which is not a matter of choice in the future either and therefore the abstract moral attachment to it cannot act as a pressure of circumstances on the choice of individuals living in a minority situation. Similarly, belonging to the minority and "being-here" is not in itself a matter of choice for the individual. Neither will it become one until living in a community, belonging to it has a real content in everyday life. The connecting frame and community forming functioning of everyday minority civil society is needed to this.

Even if the whole of the minority community cannot experience a situation of choice, its individuals can experience it in critical circumstances. They might encounter difficult situations when they have to choose between remaining within the community and leaving it, that is, making one's way. This becomes a delicate moral issue when the inner cohesion of the community breaks up. Those who try to keep up the illusion of community using all methods seek the cause of the community's atomization in exterior circumstances or in the disturbance of moral and cultural life, but never in the everyday life of an individual. The prophets of moral attachment to "being-here" do not think in

terms of a real community therefore. The moral imperatives proclaimed by them are motivated by a pseudo-religious relation to an illusory community: the idealization of the community conceals the real problems of individual existence which appear in these prophets' individual everyday life too. This is best proved by the cases when the alleged champions of reliability exploited this false morality to pitty ends.

In fact, the moral, emotional and spiritual attachment of individuals to the community and its medium of value are based on the everyday life of civil society. In the case of undisturbed functioning the everyday civil society produces the energy necessary for the self-organization of the community and offers the individual an existence frame the fulfilling of which makes possible a safe and worthy way of life from a practical point of view. Therefore it is worth living in such a society. If there is no such existential frame, the community loses its reality based on rationality and becomes an illusory formation transmitted to the individual by abstract moral ideals and cultural symbols, a formation which does not offer the real perspectives of existential possibilities.

The individual living within an illusory community is at a crossroad in critical cases when individual prosperity and remaining within the community is impossible simultaneously. The determining factors of the existence separate and he must choose between the moral values of belonging to the community and the existential possibilities of individual success. In such cases the individual cannot choose itself and the community too, if the attraction of a rational lifestyle is stronger than the irrational attachment to an illusory community. The belief in the life-giving force of the community and the illusory creation of reality separate the natural, existential and moral unity of the individual, compelling the individual to choose between them.

The concern for the breaking up of the community in the case when exterior uncertainty of existence and deprivation of rights comes to an end is understandable from this perspective. This concern is not baseless in the case of a community which is unable to start and effectively control the everyday self-organizational processes of the civil society and ensure the possibility of its individuals' success when the circumstances guaranteeing rights and certainty of existence improve (or before this, precisely in order to obtain these). The illusions of belonging to a community dissolve as soon as it becomes obvious that individuals cannot use their rights because the conditions necessary for a community are missing and they are forced to look for success outside the community in the future too. This is reiterated in the case when there are no real community interests behind the community-propagating ideology: the ideological slogans generate only the sense

of belonging, but the practical norms of living together are not worked out. It is a similar case when the individual is not linked to a minority by his natural circumstances of life and finds his living, the sources of his existence outside the community and cultivating minority values is a sacrifice on his part. Finally, this is also the case when the disadvantages of minority being cannot be counterbalanced by the advantages of belonging to a community.

The need for a change of perspective

Minority being will only attain reality and become relevant from the point of view of individual existential possibilities if it is able to become self-organizing and reproduces itself in another form within the changing circumstances.

The questioning of the survival of minority existence should focus on the reasons of breaking the civil society frames that provide certainty of existence and of people's hopelessness and the senselessness of their life. It should also aim at sizing up the possibilities of reorganizing the everyday civil society of minority. This necessitates a change of perspective in minority conscience and in everyday practice too.

We should face therefore the obvious experimental fact that neither minority self-estimation, nor the overemphasizing of moral ties nor the hope for cultural self-realization can compensate the emptiness and uselessness of individuals' everyday life in the long run. The moral content of the real attachment to minority being can be based on the acceptance of this knowledge - it is the first step towards giving up self-deception. Only this way can we pass on from the moral phraseology of minority-saving to the communicative action of promoting civil society. Thus, instead of disseminating community-illusions, minority culture becomes a real value-creation guided by universal measures.